STRICTLY COMMERCIAL

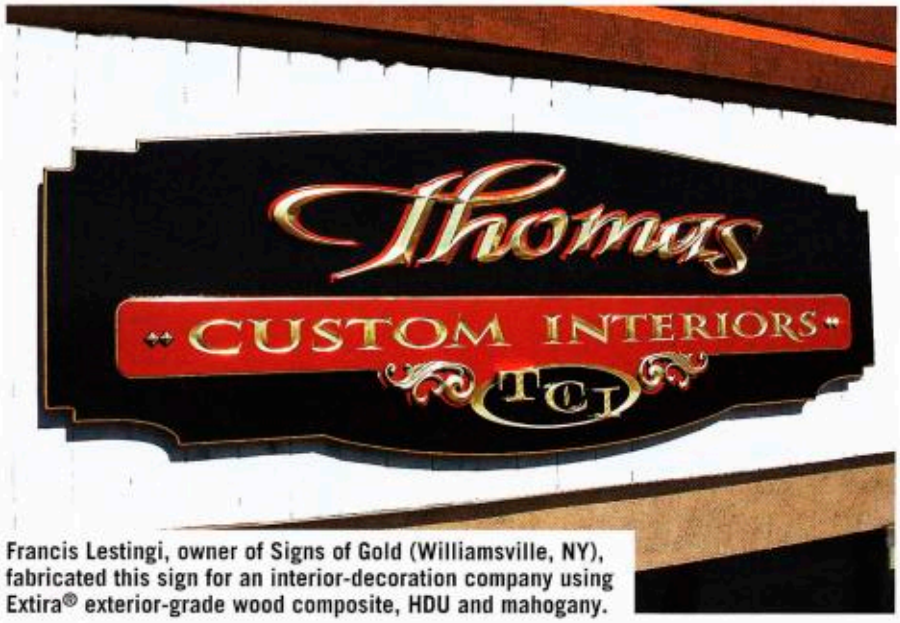
By Francis Lestingi

Francis Lestingi, proprietor of Signs of Gold Inc. (Williamsville, NY), fabricates gilded, handcarved, wood signs.

Multi Media

Signs of Gold's Francis Lestingi marries myriad substrates into one sign.

When a group of upscale interior decorators opened a posh showroom, they called upon my shop to design and fabricate a handcarved, fascia sign that was elegant and strikingly beautiful, yet simple and arresting. And, they wanted it big — 4 × 10 ft.



Francis Lestingi, owner of Signs of Gold (Williamsville, NY), fabricated this sign for an interior-decoration company using Extira® exterior-grade wood composite, HDU and mahogany.

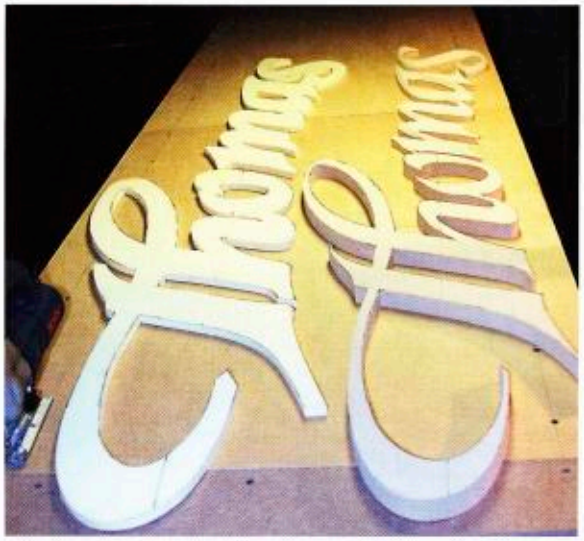
Trying out Extira

I immediately knew that, although I cherish mahogany as a substrate, it wasn't feasible for this project. Such a huge panel would be unmanageably heavy — and quite expensive. So we decided to try CMI's (Chicago) Extira®, a relatively new product comprising treated, exterior-grade, wood composite, as our substrate.

Similar to medium density fiberboard (MDF), Extira offers more resistance to moisture and rot. Previously, MDF had failed me due to excessive, accumulated moisture, so we experimented with Extira before using it for this project. As a torture test, we placed an Extira sample in a dishwasher and subjected it to an entire cycle. It emerged with no perceptible damage.

For another trial, I primed, painted, carved, sized and gilded the test piece and sent it back for another wash. Again, it endured a full cycle intact. Carving it was as enjoyable as carving wood; further, its uniform density eliminated concerns about grain direction. All things considered, we thought it carved far better than HDU.

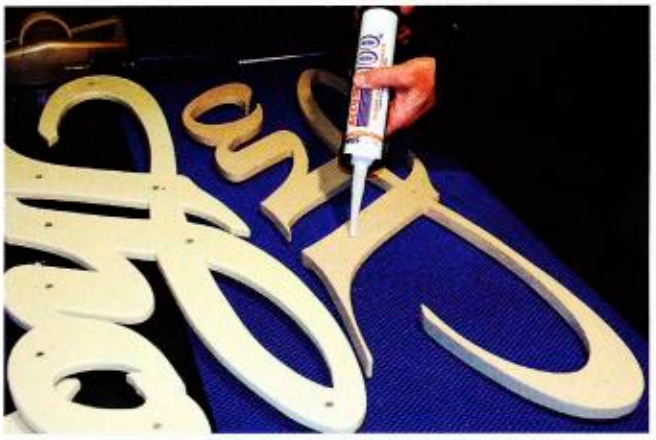
However, we didn't carve Extira for this project; it merely served as a substrate on which other media would be attached. We shaped the Extira with a saber saw and detailed its edges (featuring a cove-and-bead profile) with a handheld router. Milling was no different from working with wood. Priming with three coats of Jay Cooke's Sign Primer®, followed by two coats of TJ Ronan



Using a saber saw, Francis cut the script from ½- and ¾-in. HDU. He used the thinner piece as a frame and carved the thicker substrate to a high-profile, prismatic edge.

Francis anchored the letters using a 25-lb. bag of buckshot before he carved them.

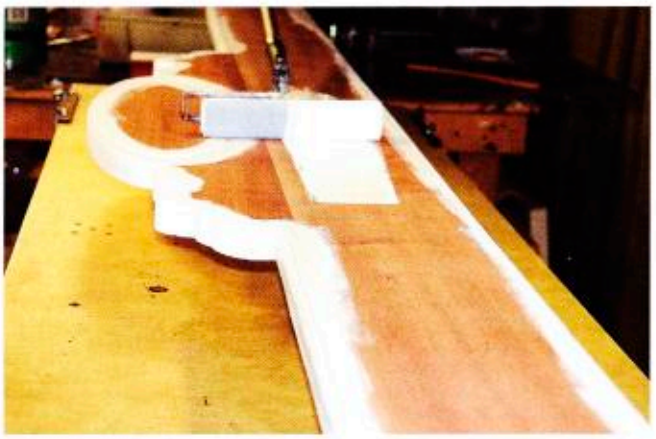
Between primer coats, Francis sanded the letters with 120- and 220-grit sandpaper.



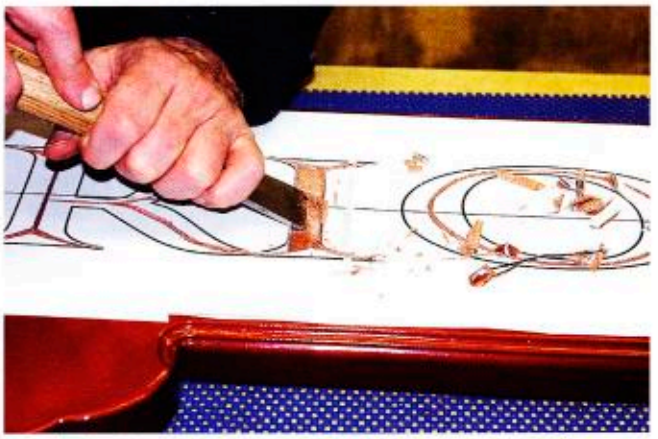
Using 6-in. deck screws and 100% silicone, he joined the separate layers of copy he crafted.

Francis used Sign Arts Products Corp.'s (Dana Point, CA) Sign•Prime primer to prepare the letters for paint.

After applying a black basecoat, he painted the letters with a custom mixture he calls New England Red.



A foam roller applied Jay Cooke's Sign•Prime to the mahogany panel.



Francis handcarved the panel. For the text, he chose Trajan, a font adapted from early Roman texts.

bulletin paint, yielded excellent results.

We noted a slight "wobble" when we flipped the ¾-in.-thick substrate during the coating process. We corrected this problem in two ways. Our installation technique employed an 8-ft. "French cleat" on the back of the panel. Later, we attached a 9-ft.-tall [long], 1¾-in. thick mahogany panel — I'll explain this later — to the substrate's front. These attachments stabilized the "motherboard."

No doubts

We designed an original script for the name, "Thomas." With a saber saw, I cut it from ½- and ¾-in. HDU. The thinner piece served as a flat, offset outline for the carved name. Using a 25-lb. bag of buckshot to hold down the HDU, we carved the script letters into a high-relief, prismatic profile using straight chisels and Nos. 2 and 3 sweep gouges. Sweep gouges produce a curved cut, whereas chisels produce

Pinstripe accents were applied along the panel.

He gilded the letters using LeFranc Charbonnel slow size and 23k, ducat, looseleaf gold.

straight cuts.

We cut the initials, "TCI," from ¾-in.-thick HDU rounded over with sandpaper. Sanding the lettering with progressively finer sandpaper grits — we began with 80, and concluded with 320 — proved essential for a smooth finished product.

We joined the prismatic, script letters with the offset outline with 6 × 1¼-in. deck screws and 100% silicone adhesive. We drove several deck screws through the ½-in. outline before marrying the panels. These screws would later function as studs in pre-drilled, silicone-filled substrate holes.

I applied three coats of Sign•Prime to the conjoined letters. Between primer coats, we sanded with 120- to 220-grit sandpaper, which provided a smooth surface that would eventually produce a brilliant gild. After allowing the primer to dry overnight, I applied two coats of bulletin enamel. We used black as the first coat, which we followed with a custom mix we call New England Red. We let the letters dry at least eight hours between coats.

The appliqué

We shaped, primed and topcoated a 17-in. × 9-ft. × 1¾-in., mahogany panel, in preparation for incised carving. First, we covered the panel with GerberMask® II removable vinyl, which we followed by laying out adapted, Roman lettering called Trajan, after the Trajan Column in Rome, which displays an early example of Roman lettering (it was erected in 113 A.D.). We customized the style using Adobe Illustrator® on my Mac G4 tower, and printed it on tracing paper with an HP laser printer.

Francis molded accent scrolls using the Smooth-On (Easton, PA) casting system.

A shot of silicone affixed each letter of the logo onto the panel.

We attached the sheets of tracing paper to the vinyl mask by spraying their reverse sides with 3M Spra-Ment™ adhesive spray. We carved directly through the paper, mask, coatings and wood. After we finished carving, we primed, topcoated, sized and gilded the letters.

We added 1Shot® chrome yellow to Lefranc Charbonnel slow size to help its visibility, and we applied the mixture to the mahogany panel letters as well as to the copy. Curing the size for approximately 48 hours provides an ample window for gilding and produces a more brilliant luster.

Francis and his son, Steven, applied the carved letters onto pre-drilled, silicone-filled holes within the Extira panel.

Polyurethane-resin castings

Our design included late 19th-century-style scrolls and diamonds that we'd previously handcarved and molded. We created the cast objects using a two-part, liquid-polyurethane resin called Smooth Cast 300, which we've used successfully in numerous other applications.

After removing the castings from the mold, we applied two coats of black Krylon Fusion spraypaint, which bonds to the plastic and serves as both primer and topcoat. After sizing and gilding, the scrolls were ready to be attached to the mahogany panel (*see* ST, *May 2003, page 40*). We attached the "TCI" letters to the mahogany panel using the same technique with which we attached the scrolls.

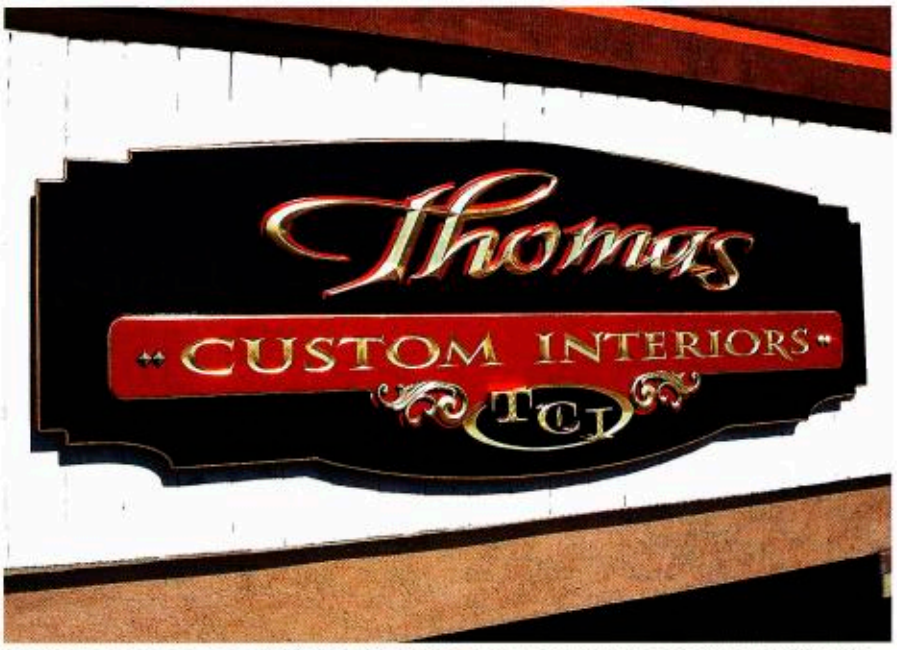
Because we completely gilded these letters, we wore cotton gloves to avoid touching the gold with bare fingers. We attached the mahogany panel to the Extira using lag bolts and silicone. We concealed the bolt heads with gilded, cast diamonds at each end of the panel. Attaching "Thomas" utilized the previously

To install the sign, Francis affixed a French cleat and a treated-pine spacer for stability.

inserted screw studs protruding behind the HDU. We inserted the studs into pre-drilled, silicone-filled holes in the Extira panel.

Installation

The method of installation employed a "French cleat," which comprised an 8-ft.-long, 2 × 10-in. plank of treated, southern yellow pine ripped down the center at a 45° angle. We attached one piece to the wall, the other behind the substrate. One foot below the wall cleat, we attached a treated, 8-ft., 2 × 4 to serve as a spacer. After we lifted and fitted the sign onto the wall cleat, we inserted lag screws into pre-drilled holes and drove them through the panels into the spacer. The virtually invisible screws, which we touched up with red paint, are nestled within the scroll's curves.



Chalk up another successful installation. The clients enjoyed the classical design elements, and Francis enjoyed the opportunity to meld different substrates into the sign.

Our clients were delighted with the design and fabrication of their new sign, and so were we. Typically, my shop's signs consist of handcarved mahogany substrates with cast-resin appliqués, but this project taught us that we could effectively add layer upon layer. Additionally, we welcomed working with Extira — its potential for signmaking looks very promising.■

More on Francis

Signs of Gold Inc. (Williamsville, NY) owner Francis Lestingi, a Queens, NY, native, taught himself pen calligraphy and brush lettering during his youth. By high school, he could gild and handletter storefront paper signs.

After high school, Lestingi entered the Christian Brothers religious teaching order, where he earned a physics degree from Catholic University and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Later, he taught physics, chemistry and theology at high schools in Rhode Island and throughout several New York City boroughs.

Ten years ago, while still teaching, Lestingi decided to return to the "lettering arts" and founded Signs of Gold. Because he enjoyed his work so much, he took early retirement and began carving fulltime. Despite his status as a "recovering college professor," he garnered first-place awards in 1999's and 2002's USSC Sign Design Competitions, and his entries have received recognition in *ST*'s contests.

Equipment and Materials

Adhesives: 3M Spra-Ment Adhesive Spray, available from art stores; Accusil 100% silicone sealant and adhesive, available from Chemical Concepts (Philadelphia), (800) 220-1966.

Casting Resin: Smooth Cast 300, available from Smooth-On Inc. (Easton, PA), (800) 762-0744.

Electronics: Apple® Macintosh G4 computer, HP® Laserjet 2200d printer.

Gilding: LeFranc Charbonnel slow size, from LeFranc & Bourgeois Inc. (René, France), www.lefranc-bourgeois.com; 23k ducat, loose-leaf, double gold, from Leo Uhlfelder Co. (Mount Vernon, NY), (914) 664-8701; and Sepp Leaf Products (New York City), (800) 971-7366.

High-Density Urethane: Sign•Foam, available from Sign Arts Products Corp. (Dana Point, CA), (800) 338-4030 or www.signfoam.com

Layout: GerberMask II, available from Gerber Scientific Products (South Windsor, CT), (800) 222-7446 or www.gspinc.com; 16-lb., 8½ × 11-in. drafting and design vellum, from Clearprint (Emeryville, CA), (800) 766-7337.

Paint: Sign•Prime, from Sign Arts Products Corp.; Jay Cooke's Sign Primer and TJ Ronan bulletin enamels, available from Garston Sign Supply (Rochester, NY), (800) 825-8808; Krylon Fusion spraypaint, available from home-improvement stores; 1Shot chrome yellow lettering enamel, from One Shot Corp. (Gary, IN), (219) 949-1684.

Substrates: Extira wood composite, from CMI (Chicago), (800) 255-0785 or www.extira.com; Mahogany panel, from KenCo Wood Products (Buffalo, NY), (800)757-9142; 2 × 4 × 8 and 2 × 10 × 10 treated lumber, available from lumber yards.

Tools: Various chisels and gouges; Bosch saber saw and plunge router; 80- to 320-grit sandpaper; and various screws and bolts, all available from home-improvement stores.